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SUBJECT: DAS DANIN'S AUGUST 29 MEETING WITH ISRAELI DEFMIN
COS HERZOG FOCUSES ON SYRIA, LEBANON, PALESTINIANS AND EGYPT

Classified By: Ambassador Richard H. Jones. Reasons: 1.4 (b)(d).

SUMMARY

1. (S) In an August 29 meeting, Michael Herzog, the Chief of Staff to Israeli Defense Minister Barak, told visiting NEA DAS Robert Danin that Israel is not looking for a fight with either Hizballah or Syria, but needs to prepare for one just in case. Earlier concerns within government circles about a "summer war" with Syria and Hizballah have abated to some degree -- especially after Israel sent signals to Syria that it is not seeking a fight with that country -- but the Israeli public is still anxious about a war, especially as the media keeps the issue alive. On the Palestinians, Herzog said that the GOI has respect for Palestinian Authority (PA) President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad, but considers them and the PA generally incapable of delivering peace. The GOI will do what it can to support them -- and is making progress on the fugitives issue -- but will always put Israel's security ahead of taking risks for peace. Herzog indicated that the GOI is considering ways to optimize Israel's security presence in the West Bank, and to re-configure permanent and mobile checkpoints in ways to provide humanitarian relief to Palestinian travelers. Herzog argued that Egypt is not doing enough to stop the smuggling of explosives and terrorists from Egypt and the Sinai into the Gaza Strip, and should not be provided any technical assistance to improve its counter-smuggling capabilities until it takes action where and when it can within Egypt. Herzog claimed that Egypt has lied about supposed attempts to stop suspected Palestinian terrorists from traveling in and out of the Gaza Strip, and has used negotiations with Hamas on the return of kidnapped IDF Corporal Gilad Shalit to urge Hamas to reach out to PA President Abbas and re-form a Palestinian National Unity Government. END SUMMARY.

SYRIA AND LEBANON: ISRAEL NOT LOOKING FOR A FIGHT

2. (S) Herzog said that Israel is not seeking a fight with Syria or Hizballah, but is preparing in case either attack Israel. He said that the level of overall concern within Israeli government circles about a "summer war" has reduced over the last three months, but that the general public still fears that there will be hostilities with Syria or Hizballah in the not-too-distant future, and that these fears are being stoked by the media. Acknowledging the possibility that Syrian and Israeli preparations and exercises on and near the Golan Heights could accidentally lead to hostilities, Herzog claimed that Israel has delivered messages to the Syrians making it clear that it is not seeking a fight with Syria.

He said that the Syrians appear to have received and understood the messages. Nevertheless, Herzog noted that Syria is taking precautions to ensure that it would be able to retaliate in the event Israel attacks Syria, or the U.S. launches an attack on Syria or Iran. Syria has accelerated its production of long range rockets and is transferring them to Hizballah on a daily basis. It is procuring sophisticated rockets and anti-tank guided missiles from Russia at unprecedented levels. With Russia's help, Syria is upgrading its MiG-29 and MiG-31 squadrons. It has moved rockets forward to its border with the Golan Heights. And it is conducting exercises near the Heights.

13. (S) While Israel does not expect a surprise attack involving divisions, reminiscent of that carried out by Syria in 1973, Herzog cautioned that Israel cannot rule out that Syria might carry out small raids with commandos designed to grab territory, force international intervention, and pressure Israel into talks with Syria. He added that in the aftermath of the Second Lebanon War, Syria began openly preparing "resistance units" along its border with the Golan Heights, organizing and training them on the Hizballah model under the impression that Hizballah performed well against the IDF during last summer's war. While Herzog dismissed the notion that Syria would use these "resistance units" to attack Israel, he reiterated that under current conditions, the Syrians could misinterpret something and launch a pre-emptive strike against Israel using commandos.

14. (S) Herzog's impression was that Hizballah does not want a fight with Israel any time soon, especially as this would disrupt its ongoing efforts to strengthen its military capabilities and make political gains in Lebanon. Herzog said that Syria is transferring long-range rockets to

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Hizballah on a daily basis, and that Hizballah now has more rockets in its arsenal than it had before the Second Lebanon War. He said Hizballah is present in southern Lebanon, but has been forced by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the enhanced UNIFIL to operate discreetly and keep its arms hidden. In the meantime, it has expanded its activities north of the Litani River, and is building up infrastructure there. While Hizballah is now farther away from the Israel-Lebanon border and northern Israel (reducing the likelihood that Hizballah would carry out a cross-border operation like that of July 12, 2006, which started the Second Lebanon War), Herzog stressed it is capable of hitting targets deep within Israel.

15. (S) Pointing to Hizballah's rebuilding of itself, Herzog echoed the view voiced by others in the GOI that UNSCR 1701 is not being fully implemented, and that more needs to be done -- especially to stop weapons transfers across the Syria-Lebanon border. Danin pointed out while Hizballah had successfully reconstituted itself, the situation in southern Lebanon was significantly different now that UNIFIL and the LAF were on the ground there; Hizballah no longer enjoyed freedom of movement. Herzog acknowledged as positive the effect of UNIFIL's and the LAF's activities in southern Lebanon, but expressed concern that Hizballah may carry out attacks on UNIFIL in the not-too-distant future, using proxies for plausible deniability. (He said that while Israel has no concrete proof, it has bits of intelligence which suggest that Hizballah was behind recent fatal attacks against UNIFIL.)

PALESTINIANS: ISRAEL WANTS TO HELP, BUT...

16. (S) Assessing the current Palestinian Authority (PA) government, Herzog said that the GOI shares the USG view that it is the best such government that the U.S. and Israel have had to work with for some time, but cautioned that in Israel's view, it is very weak, chaotic, and thus will

unlikely be able to deliver for peace, even if it has the will to do so. Herzog spoke highly of PA PM Salaam Fayyad -- dedicated, probably not corrupt, focused correctly on security -- but noted that he is overstretched and has no administrative or institutional support: "He answers the phone himself when you call him."

17. (S) Herzog said that so, far, the Palestinians have focused on two issues in the Abbas-Olmert meetings: (A) fugitives and (B) assuming responsibility for security of West Bank communities. Progress has been made on the fugitives issue, and the two sides are now in "phase two." Fatah and Al-Aksa Martyrs Brigades fugitives have not necessarily surrendered their weapons, but they are "staying put," and not carrying out activities. Herzog expressed skepticism about existing Palestinian security forces assuming responsibility for security in West Bank communities, and said that the Israelis have been candid with their Palestinian counterparts on this matter. He suggested that Fayyad agrees with the Israeli viewpoint, and claimed that Fayyad has even asked that Israeli security forces remain in the West Bank for the time being. Herzog acknowledged, however, that Fayyad is under pressure to show some progress in this area, and that it would help Abbas and Fatah if they could demonstrate that they are essential to maintaining law and order in the West Bank. Herzog said that Israel will do all that it can to help Abbas and Fayyad, but only up to the point where Israel's security interests come into play. He noted, "All it will take is one suicide bombing, and then it will all be over." Subtly acknowledging that Israel's security services aren't perfect -- by referring to the two failed bombings in green-line Israel that initially went undetected -- Herzog suggested that Israel will have to maintain a security presence in the West Bank for the foreseeable future, even as it considers ways to optimize the use of permanent and mobile checkpoints and provide some relief to Palestinians at those points.

HERZOG: EGYPT CAN DO MORE. WAIT BEFORE GIVING AID

18. (S) Herzog assessed the situation along the Israel-Egypt and Egypt-Gaza border as bad and not having improved, despite Israeli efforts to explore with the Egyptians what could be done to stop the cross-border smuggling of terrorists and explosives between Sinai and the Gaza Strip. He acknowledged that at some point, Egypt could probably benefit from some

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technical assistance to improve its detection and monitoring capabilities, but stressed that such assistance should not be provided to Egypt until it takes action where and how it already can. Egypt does not have to wait for suspected smugglers and terrorists to get to the Egypt-Gaza border before detaining them -- it could detain them in Cairo or en route. So far, Israel has not seen any effort on the GOE's part to take such action.

19. (S) Herzog also implied that Egypt has been less than honest about its involvement in negotiations with Hamas to secure the release of kidnapped IDF Corporal Gilad Shalit, and has lied about its efforts to stop terrorists from crossing between the Sinai and the Gaza Strip. He claimed that Egyptian negotiators have discussed with Hamas representatives the idea of linking progress on the release of Shalit to re-establishing ties between Hamas and the new PA government, thereby breaking Hamas' isolation, and re-forming a Palestinian National Unity Government (NUG). He said Egypt also denied it had any role in a Hamas terrorist who -- according to Israeli intelligence -- exited the Gaza Strip via the Rafah crossing, traveled through Sinai on to Iran for training, and then returned to the Gaza Strip. This, Herzog stressed, could not have been done without Egyptian complicity. In consideration of the above, Herzog urged that the U.S. continue to put pressure on the Egyptians

to take action against smuggling using what they have now, before looking at giving them technical assistance for tunnel detection. Herzog also said that the GOI has no interest in re-opening the Israel-Egypt peace treaty to discuss increasing the number of Egyptian uniformed security personnel along the Egypt-Israel and Egypt-Gaza border. Israel had already done this once with the September 2005 Agreement on the Egypt-Gaza border (which allows up to 750 Egyptian troops to be deployed along the Philadelphi corridor), and has no desire to do it again.

¶10. (U) NEA DAS Danin has cleared this cable.

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JONES